

Fall 2014 Semester Closing Note to my Students

By Don Sutherland

At the end of each semester, I provide my students with a closing note about the course. That note seeks to place the course, its content, and its requirements into a larger context. I do so, because I believe it is helpful for students to have one last opportunity to understand why they took the course and perhaps better identify what they might have gained from the course. Such understanding can perhaps reinforce learning for the long-term.

Below is the note to my fall 2014 students:

With the semester approaching its conclusion, it is a good time to share some thoughts and insights about the course.

As you may remember—well, at least some of you—the course’s introductory exercise quoted former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s observation, “Great leaders in some circumstances are not great in others.” Perhaps it’s fitting to close the course with a quote from the closing chapter of Dr. Kissinger’s most recent book, *World Order*:

Long ago, in youth, I was brash enough to think myself able to pronounce on “The Meaning of History” [Kissinger’s undergraduate honors thesis at Harvard University, 1950]. I now know that history’s meaning is a matter to be discovered, not declared.

That description of the nature of history could be applied more broadly to knowledge, in general, and strategic management in particular. As had been emphasized almost ad nauseam during the semester, there is no ideal organizational structure, corporate strategy, or management style that applies to all companies, all the time.

Such a situation could only exist under the impossible requirement that the environment in which companies operate is static. In that context, nothing would change. Only then could there be a permanently ideal structure, strategy, or management style.

Under such circumstances, the idea of strategy would be pointless. Convergence would have led to a single structure, strategy, and management approach. Stability would have led to the permanence of that outcome.

Notions of sustainable competitive advantage and economic profits would be irrelevant. Everything about the operation of a business would have been commoditized. In such a sterile setting, there would be no latitude for imagination or personalization. Innovation would cease to exist. The personal satisfaction one can attain from a challenging career would be lacking. Barriers to material and social progress would be substantial, if not insurmountable.

Fortunately, that world does not exist. Instead, the world is spiced by dynamism and risk. Change is occurring everywhere and at all times. Uncertainty shrouds a share of the developments that are actively shaping tomorrow, including consequential ones that can give rise to disruptive technologies and far-reaching economic transformations. Therefore, corporate

strategy is at least as much about discovery, as it is about applying frameworks, principles, and insights.

In this dynamic and sometimes risky world, it is important for one to have a sound understanding of what one knows and also a healthy appreciation of what one does not know. That balanced perspective can put one in a better position to begin probing the uncertainty inherent in the continually changing world in which we live, leveraging the insights that history can offer, and generating the possibilities that mark the starting point for strategy formulation.

One cannot automatically assume that tomorrow will be an extension of today. One cannot automatically conclude that what one does not know is irrelevant. One cannot select only the information that is most favorable to one's interests, needs, or aspirations, while disregarding inconvenient, unpleasant, or contradictory information. One cannot pretend that everything important is what exists today and that history is obsolete.

Although, one cannot fully or even largely know tomorrow until it is upon us, one can cultivate an intellectual map that can guide one into the future. Such a map can encourage one to raise the questions that need to be asked, identify the kind of information one needs to solve one's problems or pursue one's opportunities, find that information where it may reside, and tap that information to formulate scenarios, design approaches for testing them, and then develop strategies based on objective attention to that evidence.

This course provided an opportunity under which the attentive student should have been able to further develop just such an intellectual framework. Afterward, it will be up to each student to expand upon that framework from his or her future study, career progress, and life's experience.

A modest and continuing investment in time can lead to the cultivation of what can become a lasting and increasingly valuable intellectual framework. In contrast, absent such investment, the knowledge that was developed in this course and at Lehman College will quickly disappear, much as the footprints in the Sahara vanish in the midst of the often unforgiving winds that continually sweep that desert.

The purpose of this closing note was to give you a larger context in which to place the course. An ability to view things within a larger context will serve you well, even if you remain focused on the immediate tasks related to the approaching final exam and course grade.

Good luck to all.